



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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County Seeing Sharp Increase in Flu Activity, Hospitalizations

Lewis and Clark County, like much of the nation, has seen a sharp jump in flu cases in the past month. Several have been severe enough to require hospital stays.

Sixty-two cases have been confirmed through laboratory tests so far this flu season, according to the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department. Two dozen of those have been just since Jan. 1. Of those 62 people, 46 had no record of getting a flu shot this year.

The number of confirmed cases is “only the tip of the iceberg,” said Karen Dobson Wandel, public health nurse supervisor at the health department. Many more cases are not officially confirmed through lab tests.

So far, 11 county residents have been hospitalized with the flu, Wandel said. All were 50 or older. No deaths due to flu have been reported in the county, but as of Dec. 27, one person had died of flu elsewhere in Montana, according to the state health department.

“I think we’re getting hit a little later than other parts of the state,” Wandel said. “But we’re seeing a sharp increase now, and there’s potentially a lot of flu season ahead of us. It’s absolutely not too late to get vaccinated.”

The flu season generally runs from October through March.

Wandel attributed the surge in flu activity in part to the holidays, when people are more likely to travel and gather and so are more likely to transmit the virus to others. Another factor is that this season’s flu vaccine is not a good match for one strain of flu that’s circulating.

Flu viruses change constantly from season to season and even within the same season. Each year, the flu vaccine is designed to protect against three or four different flu viruses based on which are expected to be most common that year.

“Even though the vaccine isn’t a perfect match, we really urge people who haven’t been vaccinated yet to do so,” Wandel said. “It’s possible that other flu strains will show up later in the season.

“The vaccine still offers protection, even for people who’ve already been sick with one strain of flu,” she added. “And even partial protection is better than no protection. Not getting the flu shot ensures that a person has no protection.”

Public health officials recommend an annual flu shot for everyone over 6 months of age. Vaccination is particularly important for people at high risk of serious flu-related complications and their close contacts. This includes infants; pregnant women; kids and adults with chronic medical conditions like chronic breathing problems, cancer, diabetes, or heart disease; and adults 65 or older.

If you have a high risk and get flu symptoms, seek medical attention early. There are effective medications to treat the flu, but only if they're started within the first few days of illness.

The health department urges county residents to protect themselves and their community from flu by covering coughs and sneezes, staying away from sick people, staying home when sick, and washing hands often to help stop the spread of flu viruses.

The health department offers flu shots Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 1930 Ninth Avenue. No appointment is needed, and the department bills all insurance providers.